A State Park System is Born

The Beginning...

In the decades before California had an organized environmental movement, few foresaw the day when the state's northern coastal ranges would no longer be blanketed with redwood forests. With alarming speed, entire mountainsides of ancient forests were felled. New cities bustling with business and industry and fueled by the riches of California's abundant deposits of gold and silver were erupting on the landscape. It appeared to many that the bounty of this rich land was without end.

But some Californians saw things differently. In the 1880s, Ralph Sidney Smith, editor and manager of the Redwood City Times and Gazette, began to enlighten his readers about the need to preserve part of California's unique redwood forests. Smith's life was cut short with his murder, but he had planted the seed that would ultimately reach fruition as California's first redwood state park. His crusade was picked up and carried on by other prominent Californians, such as photographer Andrew P. Hill, by members of the new, yet influential Sempervirens Club, and by the dozens of writers who promoted the idea of preserving the best of California, forever.

Heated political battles finally brought compromise and passage of a bill authorizing state funds for the purchase of redwood property in Santa Cruz County. Governor Henry T. Gage signed the bill on March 16, 1901. The following year, the newly-appointed California Redwood Park Commission approved acquisition of the first 2,500 acres in Big Basin at a cost of $100 per acre.

Building the System...

The actions of turn-of-the-century citizens and lawmakers to preserve islands of California's most valuable lands for future generations put the Golden State in the forefront of the preservation movement. Unlike national parks, state parks, such as Big Basin and Humboldt Redwoods, did not need to be proven economically useless to any mining, timber, or grazing interests before being granted park status. However, unlike newly-established western national parks, which were already on federally owned land, most California park lands had to be purchased from private owners.

The Native Sons of the Golden West and the Native Daughters of the Golden West,

working with other preservation-minded organizations, were instrumental in raising money and securing the cooperation of the Legislature to identify and create state historic monuments. Their successes included the Monterey Custom House, the Pioneer Monument (Donner Memorial), San Pasqual Battlefield, the Bear Flag Monument in historic Sonoma Plaza, and General Vallejo's Petaluma Adobe. Some of these efforts to preserve California's history took years to reach fruition and cost many thousands of dollars.

Control of the state's historic monuments remained with independent boards and commissions until 1921. Today, the State Historical Resources Commission conforms to standards established under the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act as well as the Public Resources Code. Responsibility for state and federal historic preservation programs now rests with the Office of Historic Preservation. Before 1927, no comprehensive plan existed for preserving California's recreational, natural, and cultural treasures. However, with leadership from the Save-the-Redwoods League, a broad coalition of groups and individuals united their collective powers into a new campaign for a state park bill. The new bill swiftly gained the unanimous approval of the Legislature and was signed into law by Governor C.C. Young, to take effect in 1927.

The following year, a newly-established State Park Commission began gathering support for the first state park bond issue. Its efforts were rewarded in 1928 when Californians voted nearly three-to-one in favor of a $6 million park bond act. In addition, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., completed a statewide survey of potential park lands that defined basic long-range goals and provided guidance for the acquisition and development of state parks. With Newton Drury serving as acquisition officer, the new system of state parks rapidly began to grow.

In 1951, Newton Drury became Director of the California Division of Beaches and Parks. During his tenure, much of the state park system's share of offshore oil royalties, which had been suspended in 1947, began to flow once again. When Drury retired in 1959, at age 70, the California state park system was composed of 150 beaches, parks, and historic monuments, which covered 615,000 acres.

During the 1960s, there emerged an intense public interest in preserving California's wild

lands from encroaching development. By a 1.5 million plurality vote, Californians approved a $150 million bond act in 1964, which allowed acquisition of new state park lands including Point Mugu and Ed Z'berg - Sugar Pine Point. The 1960s were also a time of change in the structure and hierarchy of the state park system. In 1961, under Director Charles DeTurk, the old Division of Beaches and Parks merged with the Division of Recreation and the Division of Small Craft Harbors.

William Penn Mott, Jr. became director in 1967, and vowed a new era of growth even though he was faced with gubernatorial budget cuts and hiring freezes. Mott successfully transformed the Division of Beaches and Parks into the Department of Parks and Recreation. With the formation of the Department, a shift was made to management of more active recreational facilities. The development of the Central Valley Project created reservoirs that provided recreational opportunities to be managed by the new Department. During this same period, the separate Park Commission and Recreation Commission were merged into a nine-member Park and Recreation Commission. The functions of the Department were centralized, with district staff positions moved to headquarters. Individual parks were grouped under area managers who in turn reported to district superintendents.

Today...

A mandate to acquire and operate state recreation areas and facilities was provided in 1974 when the people of California approved Proposition 1, a $250 million state park bond issue. By the end of the decade, the California state park system had 500 miles of lake shore, 87 miles of river frontage, 200 miles of coastline, 14,000 campsites, and 1,500 miles of riding and hiking trails. Historical units included missions, forts, the gold discovery site at Coloma, Hearst San Simeon, Jack London's home, Bidwell Mansion and many other sites. In addition, an entirely new division -- the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Division -- was added to the Department.

In 1983, a comprehensive report of the threats to natural and scenic values of the state park system was completed. This report, Stewardship 1983, led to funding for major resource management efforts. Between 1984 and 1993, $21 million was expended through the Natural Heritage Stewardship and Statewide Resource Management programs, which resulted in restoration and protection of California's diverse natural and cultural heritage.

California State Parks began the 1990s with over 260 park units, 280 miles of coastline, 625 miles of lake and river frontage, nearly 18,000 campsites, 3,000 miles of hiking, biking and equestrian trails, and 450 miles of off-highway vehicle trails on nearly 1.3 million acres. California State Parks represents the most diverse natural and cultural heritage holdings of any land management agency in California. These lands support a stunning array of the state's landscape provinces, environmentally sensitive habitat areas, threatened species, ancient Native American sites and historic facilities. With almost twenty-five percent of California's magnificent coastline under its care, California State Parks manages the state's finest coastal wetlands, estuaries, and dune systems.

At the same time, the demands of more than 30 million Californians for recreational opportunities are increasing. In recent years, over 70 million visits annually are made to California State Parks, with most visits occurring between mid-May and mid-September.